



MIAMI BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CENTER, INC.

June 6, 2003

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Commissioner of Social Security
P.O. Box 17703
Baltimore, MD 21235-7703

Main Building
3850 West Flagler Street
Miami, Florida 33134
Tel.: (305) 774-3300
Fax: (305) 774-6210

RE: Update/Revision to Disability Benefits for the Mentally Ill

Dear Sir or Madam,

**Board of Directors
2002-2004**

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C.E.O.

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The Miami Behavioral Health Center, Inc. (MBHC) is a private not for profit organization located in Miami, FL. Having provided mental health and substance abuse services to over 69,000 individuals during the last 25 years, our agency finds it crucial that the following key issues be taken into consideration when *updating and revising the rules used to evaluate mental disorders of adults and children who apply for, or receive, disability benefits under title II and Supplemental Income (SSI) payments based on disability under title XVI of the Social Security Act.*

- The application process for individuals who are uninformed and/or do not have proper representation, may be very intimidating, confusing and difficult.
- The application process for individuals, especially the chronic mentally ill, applying for disability is extremely lengthy between the initial submission and final response. Meantime, the individual becomes costly for the state who carries the financial burden of serving the person as he/she comes in and out of crisis stabilization programs.
- Staff at social security offices do not obtain sufficient clinical skills for evaluating mentally ill individuals to properly determine eligibility.
- Individuals with illegal immigration status are not eligible for any benefits. The downfall is the illegal aliens which are chronically mentally ill, costing the government a significant amount of money due to high frequency of hospitalizations.
- There continues to be great difficulties accessing benefits for former convicts who are mentally ill.
- A significant number of mentally ill individuals would benefit from the rehabilitative and social aspects linked with obtaining employment, however are afraid to do so out of fear of losing their benefits, including Medicaid, upon successfully gaining employment.
- The current maximum benefits is barely enough for a single individual to meet his/her needs without seeking some type of supplemental income.



One of the
United Way
family of agencies.



A nonprofit mental health organization funded by the Florida Department of Children & Families,
the United Way of Miami-Dade and Miami-Dade County; partially funded by
Florida Department of Elder Affairs, sliding scale patient fees, and private donations.



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF
**CHILDREN
& FAMILIES**

MBHC suggests the following for your consideration:

- ◆ Promote and motivate disabled individuals to seek a limited amount of paid employment hours without being penalized.
- ◆ Solicit businesses to provide employment to capable mentally ill persons by offering incentives.
- ◆ Train social security office staff on mental illness and comprehensive assessment skills.
- ◆ Develop a modified assistance program to serve those groups of individuals that do not qualify for traditional benefits yet are very costly to the system (i.e, illegal aliens, ex-convicts).
- ◆ Modify the regulations in a dynamic manner that is supportive and sensitive to the needs of mentally ill individuals, without increasing potential for fraud.

MBHC appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback for this revision. It is our mission to constantly seek ways to improve services and advocate on behalf of the mentally ill. Should you have interest in contacting me, please do so at (305) 774-3402.

Sincerely,



Ileana Ruiz-Garcia
Chief Operating Officer